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ABSTRACT

Marriages, just like the individuals in them, go through stages of development. Understanding these relatively predictable stages can be helpful to couples, by allaying apprehension, promoting preparation for change, and putting fluctuations into perspective. Research on marital stages and experiences in counseling couples suggest that marriages typically pass through six stages: pre-marital, early marriage, child bearing, childrearing, mid-life, i.e., the years with adolescents, and the post-parental years. Counselors should promote growth and marital communication to help couples negotiate the circuitous paths of their relationships. (Author/JAC)

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Developmental Issues in Counseling with Couples

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It should be kept in mind that this paper focuses on typical couples. However, increasing numbers of couples are making non-traditional choices (e.g., to delay child-bearing, to remain childless). Consequently, the framework presented does not have universal application. Nevertheless, such a framework can be used as a benchmark in working with both traditional and non-traditional couples. Insights can be gained into a couple's relationship by looking at both where the couple follows common paths and where they diverge from them.

Stages in marital relationships may vary with respect to when each stage begins and how long each stage lasts. Both of those variables may be greatly affected by a multitude of objective variables such as the ages of the couple at marriage and the number and spacing of the children. The sequence of the stages, however, shows considerably less variation. Consequently, a couple who defers childbearing until their mid-thirties may be developmentally less like their age peers and more like the typical couple in their mid-twenties.

Pre-marital Relationships

For most young couples, heterosexual relationships are used as a way to define and establish their own identities. Many young couples carry "blue prints" around with them, mapping out their views of marriage. Often, these "shoulds" are not articulated, leading a couple to make erroneous assumptions about each other's plans and hopes.

Counselors working with couples anticipating marriage should help the couple examine their choices and goals. Is the partner being chosen to complement or provide an identity? Does the choice reflect caring

and compatibility or is it a way of leaving a lonely or otherwise undesirable situation?

Current thinking suggests that pre-marital counseling should have four main goals:

1. education, especially on sexual matters and ideas
2. examination and improvement of communication skills
3. exploration of options
4. examination and sharing of backgrounds, values, and life style preferences

Premarital counseling, then, should go beyond the brief dialogue with the clergy which, until recently, was its only form. Counseling should help the couple review their decisions, become better acquainted, and develop some skills to continue those processes.

Early Years of Marriage

Generally, the early years of a marriage are a very positive phase. However, a number of significant tasks or hurdles often arise during these years and can lead to tension and conflict if not appropriately resolved (Sheehy, 1976).

During the early years of a marriage, most couples must make a commitment to a new system. Ties to parents loosen while those to the mate intensify. However, some compare the love they are receiving from their mates to the devotion and caretaking they received from their parents and find the mates wanting. Counselors may help such couples reassess their needs and realign their relationships.

Some couples, during these years, have trouble balancing their ideal and real self-images. They may feel obligated to live up to their images of what adults, spouses, and families are supposed to be like.

Such couples may benefit from help in establishing comfortable roles and accepting their divergence from role models. Mututally acceptable home, family, and work priorities must be established and, often, compromises and adjustments must be made via effective communication.

Jealousy and insecurity are other difficulties which commonly trouble the recently-married couple. These feelings may stem from the partners' fears that they will lose their mates' love if they show who they really are or appear too different from their mates. This is also, of course, related to self-image and self-esteem. Counselors can help the individuation process that generally takes place during the early marriage years by helping couples to view each others' differences with support and acceptance.

Most couples have at least a few years of a two-career childless marriage. Gould (1978) found that most couples were enthusiastic about their lifestyles during those years although it is not uncommon for couples to have difficulty meeting the demands of two careers. Relocation necessitated by one spouse's career may compel the couple to come to grips with difficult questions such as, "Who's career is more important?" One study of couples who met in graduate school suggested that during the first few years after entering their professions, women grew in self-confidence while men declined (Gould, 1978). Such shifts may result in marital tension as the partners move in opposite directions.

In general, however, the years before child bearing are positive ones in the marriage cycle. For an increasing number of couples, those years are so rewarding that whether or not to have children becomes a

very difficult decision. For most middle class women today, deciding whether or not to have children is a more sigificant and difficult decision than is deciding whether or not to have a career outside the home.

Most people have ambivalent feelings about both parenthood and their own adequacy as parents. However, such feelings are often submerged by the prevailing norm of childbearing. Consequently, it is not uncommon for couples who choose childbearing to encounter their reservations after the children have already arrived. Similarly, couples who, during the early years of marriage, decide against children are often troubled by resurfacing doubts. Counselors can help couples to examine all aspects of the childbearing question, to see that a decision not to parent can be reassessed in a few years, to look at whether they are chosing for or against something and to examine the impact of cultural norms on their inclinations.

For some couples, this decision will be radically altered by an unplanned pregnancy. Ideally, when a pregnacy does occur, it will have been planned and each partner will have had the chance to adjust to the complexities of living and loving with another. The partners will have separated from their families of origin and will be ready to expand their new families. However, couples who experience an unplanned pregnancy may not feel ready for that change in their lives. Counselors may become involved in helping such couples consider the option of abortion. This option often seems particularly undesirable when an unplanned pregnancy happens to a married couple. However, clinical practice suggests that unplanned children are more likely to be

resented, rejected, abused, or scapegoated in their families than are children who were planned and wanted. If abortion becomes the choice, counselors need to help the couple mourn the loss of that potential child when they say "maybe some day, but not now." Whatever decision is made about an unplanned pregnancy, counseling with both partners, where each can express and explore positive, negative, and ambivalent feelings, is critical.

Just as some couples must cope with unwanted pregnancies, others must cope with the failure to conceive when they are hoping for a pregnancy. These clients, both male and female, are likely to exhibit a multitude of emotions such as embarrassment, shock, anger, depression, grief, isolation, helplessness, and a feeling of being defective. The infertile couple may have to radically alter their images of the ideal family and may feel that their life's plans have gone awry. Feelings of control and security may be diminished along with the partners' feelings of desirabilty and productivity. The sexual relationship may be impaired and can come to be viewed as a task with no payoff. Some express sadness at being at the end of their genetic line while others express the thought that now they will forever remain a child, never achieving full adult status because of their inability to procreate. Infertility can be particularly damaging to the self-image of traditional women who have viewed their reproductive role as primary.

Counselors working with infertile couples need to be familiar with the stages of grieving or dying to help clients resolve this disappointment; most will need to mourn while, at the same time,

building up their strengths and skills so that they may find other rewarding directions in their lives.

Early Childbearing and Childrearing Years

Couples typically begin childbearing after about three years of marriage. Major tasks to be accomplished by couples during the childbearing years include making space in their lives for children, taking on parenting roles, and realigning their relationships with their extended families.

For most couples, the birth of the first child means expanding their own territory to include a dependent and challenging addition to the family, while trying to retain both the individuation and the sense of being a couple that they may only recently have achieved. Family systems theorists believe that the greatest stress on a family system occurs when people enter or leave the family (e.g., via birth, death, marriage, divorce). For most couples, then, the birth of the first child is a highly stressful event. Embarking on parenting generally requires that the partners change the implicit agreements they have had with each other and redefine their lifestyles.

Some couples may resist change and tighten the boundaries they have established. The child may be viewed as a threatening intruder.

Husbands may feel envious of their wives' new roles and of the importance the new baby assumes. Spouse abuse seems to increase during the child bearing years and may reflect the husband's anger at a perceived loss of power and importance (Gould, 1978).

Women, too, may feel anger and jealousy during the childbearing years. Most women lose a great deal of freedom and independence when

they become parents and maintaining a marriage of equals becomes particularly difficult during these years. Even those women who have chosen a traditional marriage may find themselves resenting their husband's freer lifestyle. The wife, too, may resent the attention her husband lavishes on the child at a time when she feels such a strong need for attention for herself.

Many women today feel that they are in a "no-win" situation. They feel guilty if they do not stay home to care for their children and they feel guilty if they are not working and contributing to the family income. Women who try to combine parenting and a career often become overwhelmed and resentful, partly because of their own inability to ask for help. During the childbearing years, women seem to think alot about their own mothers as parents. Anger once felt at their mothers' shortcomings may become self-directed, and unrealistic standards for parenting may be established.

Parenting often brings with it a decline in family income and an increase in expenses. This can contribute to the couple's resentment of their altered lifestyles.

Counselors working with recent parents often need to help them cope with a multitude of emotional and tangible changes. Such couples can use help in recalling the reasons for their decision to parent and attending to the positive aspects of childbearing.

The Years With Young Children

The median duration of a marriage before a divorce is seven years. For most couples, this is the time when planned childbearing is

well under way and there are small children at home. This, then, seems to be a difficult period for many couples.

These years seem to be a time when many couples feel that they are stagnating and becoming too dependent on each other. They may agitate for change in the marriage and, if it is not forthcoming, may feel a need to break away and advance. This is often the time when infidelity first occurs.

Counselors can help such couples to review their marriages and plan productive changes. They can be steered away from valuing change for the sake of change, a common feeling during these years. Couples should be encouraged to examine carefully any major changes in the family structure (e.g., divorce, birth of another child "to cement the family") and will probably need help in finding more time by themselves and more time to be together without the children.

Sometimes, during this stage, the husband and/or wife unknowingly begin to use one or more of their children as scapegoats or outlets for their own unresolved marital conflicts. In turn, the children, fearing separation and abandonment, may try to prevent the parents from dealing with their marital difficulties and with each other. Outside pressures (e.g., relocation, loss of a job) can exacerbate stress already present.

Counselors can generally improve such a family system by promoting better communication and by helping to re-establish the boundary between the marital and child subsystems while strengthening the husband-wife bond. Children can be helped to gain strength from each other and from appropriate use of parental role models.

Sometimes, of course, the marital structure is too weak to allow for change and growth and the couple may decide to divorce. Counselors may see a couple considering that option or may be consulted by a single parent following a divorce. For most families, the impact of a divorce is, at least initially, shattering and far-reaching. A new counseling approach, divorce mediation, was designed to help couples avoid the adversarial nature of many divorces and achieve a relatively comfortable emotional and financial separation. Divorce mediation focuses on division of property, spouse maintenance or alimony, child support, and child custody and visitation. Particular emphasis is placed on the children's needs; one or two sessions are scheduled with the children to discuss changes in their lives and encourage expression of feelings and questions. Counselors trained in divorce mediation are often successful in establishing a cordial and cooperative base for continued family relationships after the divorce.

Mid-life: The Years With Adolescents

Tasks confronting most couples during this fifth stage of development include increasing the flexibility of the family boundaries to accommodate the adolescent children's need for independence, coping with midlife and the increasing needs of their own parents, and redefining marital and career goals.

Mid-life is the time when most individuals must confront their own mortality. Their parents may be ill or deceased and are certainly of advanced age. Many become the generation closest to death during these years while others must assume responsibility for both older and younger generations. These life changes can lead to jealousy of the adolescent

children who seem to be just beginning their lives. Similarly, emerging sexuality in adolescents can raise fears about loss of attractiveness and sexuality in parents, although it can also renew sexual interest.

Spouses may be pulled away from each other by responsibilities toward their own parents. This can lead to conflicting priorities and feelings of resentment.

The rebelliousness manifested by most adolescents can also put a strain on their parents' marriages. The young people's disobedience can call into question their parents' approaches to child rearing, leading to feelings of self-doubt. This can lead the parents to have a strong need for some evidences of success and can contribute to the development of extramarital relationships and increased importance being placed on occupational success.

For many couples, difficulties in coping with the older and younger generations are exacerbated by their own mid-life crises. Issues of mid-life arise, for most couples, during the years between 35 and 45. Women seem to encounter the mid-life crisis earlier than men, often precipitated by the last child's going to school. For men, the mid-life crisis is most often precipitated by a lack of progress at work (Sheehy, 1976).

Often, husbands and wives go in opposite directions during the middle years, both, perhaps, seeking what they have missed. The women may become involved in developing their careers while the men may want more interpersonal contact. However, many men find that their wives and adolescent children have little interest in more family closeness during these years. This may leave the men feeling disappointed and resentful

of their wives' excitement about their own careers and new opportunities.

Couples, during these years, often need help in sorting out how much separateness they need and how much the marriage can tolerate. They may need to redefine their goals and priorities and find more sources of satisfaction to counterbalance the sense of futility which may strike during these years. For some couples, this can be a period of renewal and involvement during which the lifestyle is reordered around emerging and strongly felt personal values and interests. The departure of the children from the home and the disappearance of the fear of pregnancy can lead to increased intimacy and sexuality. Making new commitments seems to be an important aspect of these years.

Some couples, however, are fearful that change during the middle years will lead to loss of security and control. Such couples may fight change by becoming immobilized, or one's partner's own fears of change may be projected onto the partner, who is blamed for preventing the spouse from doing what he or she wants to do. Women, in particular, often experience considerable anger toward their spouses and a sense of years lost or wasted. Although these women may have chosen a traditional lifestyle years earlier, they now feel as though that had been imposed upon them by their husbands. Establishing a career becomes invested with considerable importance by many women and their self-images become closely linked to their occupational progress. A failure at work often reaffirms fears of dependency and can introduce considerable strain into the marital relationship. Husbands are often bewildered by their wives' rapid changes and may feel resentful of the

often unjustified blame which the husbands receive. Counselors may need to work with mid-life clients both individually and as a couple in order to promote improved communication, work through feelings of anger and resentment, and help them establish revised and rewarding goals.

Post-parental Years

Couples moving into the post-parental years generally need to cope with many exits and entries into their families. The children will be leaving the home but will be adding their own spouses and children to the family. In addition, the couple must adapt to shifting generational roles and redefine their family life. Happiness, during these years, seems highest among those who have developed interests outside of the home (e.g., work, hobbies, clubs). Some, especially women, seem to go through a sort of preparation for widowhood by expanding their interests (Seligman, 1980).

For many, satisfaction is high during these years. There is a strong sense of being in charge of oneself, of being inner-directed and accepting of the self. Marriages generally improve during these years and go through a period of mellowing and restabilizing. The marital relationship tends to increase in importance although roles may change; the wife may still be developing her career and may need to accustom herself to a retired husband who is home much more. Sexual difficulties often arise during these years, generally with no physical cause, although intimacy can increase even though performance may decline. Some couples who have remained together for the sake of their children may now divorce. This can be particularly difficult if the decision to

end the marriage is not mutual and if, as often happens, the husband finds a new partner more quickly than does his former spouse.

Despite the sexual and communication difficulties which can arise in post-parental couples, it is promising to note that this is a period of marital enrichment for most couples. Counselors should bear that in mind when working with older couples and should be sure that age-bias does not discourage them from embarking on counseling with such couples.

This analysis of the developmental stages in a couple's relationship indicates that marriages are typically fraught with crises and challenges as well as with rewards. However, there is a great deal that counselors can do to promote growth and communication in marriages and to help couples negotiate the circuitous paths of their relationships.

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